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Sixes & Sevens: Photography, distance, and memory

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SIXES & SEVENS

Photography, Distance and Memory

by Nancy Friedland

MFA Thesis Paper

SIXES & SEVENS

Photography, Distance and Memory

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Art
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

by Nancy Friedland
Fall 2001

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November 15th, 2001

Safe

*What does the world look like
when you live in terror,
I often wonder.
Or to someone who is dying,
or to my dog.*

*Picturing someone else's pain
is a luxury,
so I've been told.*

*This is my own little horror:
in my mind's eye
I can see
the skin
hanging from their bones
like smoke.*

*I can't look away
I can just picture it.*

*Sometimes
I think
I catch a glimpse
of a war
or a holocaust.
Sometimes
I think
I see
an evil deed being done,
as I brush my teeth
and head for bed.*

Nancy Friedland, October 1999.

PROLOGUE

It's a small world, after all.

As I write this introduction, more than a month has passed since the world bore witness to the inconceivable crimes of September 11th. To me, the world feels smaller, not in a cosy way, the way we hoped it would – the global village and all that – but in a sharp and frightening way. It appears that the rest of the world does not just want to share its culinary delights and natural resources with us, it also wants to share its suffering.

The pain of war has, for me, always been contained in books or on film, in another time or another place. Mostly, war existed in the corridors of my fertile imagination. But now, seemingly without warning, war has leaked into my world. There is a distance I have felt from the “historical trauma” that I have written about. More than half a century lies between the clicking of my keyboard as I write this and the burning of books in Berlin in 1933. My understanding of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is contained in a still and silent photograph of a mushroom cloud; a relic from another era, like a tomahawk or the ruins of the Coliseum. Even more current sufferings are difficult to conceive: a cultural chasm divides the West from the millions of people dying of AIDS in Africa. Thousands of miles separate my warm home from the killing streets of Kosovo.

There is a distance between what happened in New York (I live in Canada, after all, a whole country away) and the mediated glimpses I catch on my TV and in the newspaper. But that gap has shrunk so quickly and so dramatically that I haven't had time to catch my breath. It's what we call, in graduate school, a “paradigm shift”: a time to re-evaluate everything we thought we knew.

It is difficult to assimilate all this new information about the world. Trying to hold thousands of years of history in our heads, we attempt to reconcile a rising bloodlust with a burning desire for peace. We pick and choose our histories, and we forget more than we remember. Flicking through a box of photographs, I find myself dwelling on happier times, or not just happier times, but different times: my wedding day, our trip to the

Grand Canyon in August seems so long ago, summer camp. The memories attached to these images give great comfort: I know how this story ends, the storm blew over, we found a hotel, I learned to swim.

In this paper I will discuss remembering and photographs, forgetting and constructed memory. In part one, I will detail the evolution of my concern with the role of witness, my interest in the ways we remember, and my fascination with family photographs. In part two I will discuss how these ideas lead to my undergraduate work, *children are apt to forget to remember*, *A land, alone*, and *Safe*, and ultimately, to my MFA thesis exhibit, *Sixes and Sevens*. In part three, I will look at the work of other artists who are exploring these notions, and how fiction is used to tell stories of loss and war. In part four, I will discuss family photographs and the notion of postmemory through the writings of Roland Barthes, and Marianne Hirsch, and explore their influences on my thinking and my art practice.



1. Hung Cong ('Nick') Ut, Accidental Napalm Attack, 1972

The camera as witness

Before I started art school, before I became interested in photographs, I was interested in war. During the Gulf War, I lived in Paris where people have a tendency to get pretty worked up about these things. They have a better sense of history than we do in North America, it's embedded in the pavement and floats through the murky waters of the Seine. Their memories include the Nazis marching down the Champs d'Elysées, whereas we have no memory of that kind of war, no memory of any kind of violence done to our civilian population at the hands of another state. Not here. Not in the New Country. That is what people came to North America to get away from.

War was always somewhere else, happening to someone else. But nonetheless, there were daily protests in my neighbourhood, the 11th *arrondissement*. One could

witness the burning of Israeli flags while enjoying a café crème and a cigarette; anti-Israel sentiment was quickly devolving into anti-Semitism. As I had no television on which to watch the war, I gleaned the news by listening to the radio, and by the frantic phone calls from my family at home in Canada. I made up pictures in my head that told the story of this war. As the scuds fell on Tel Aviv, I took my name off my mailbox and made plans to see Israel as soon as the war was over.

After a two-year stint milking cows and picking mangoes in the north of Israel, the land of milk and honey, I returned to Canada, and moved in with my best friend Kyo. Kyo and I have been friends since I was eleven and she was twelve. When we lived together, Kyo was in the second year of writing her Master's thesis which was later published, entitled *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and The Art of Witness*. Kyo and I always shared a love of art and would wile away the hours in high school, half-heartedly watching music videos while we doodled in our sketchbooks. I always admired the seriousness with which she took her studies, which I would forever try to emulate. In the time that we lived together, Kyo introduced me to "the art of witness" and to the profound connection between art and loss which would become so prevalent in my work. As Kyo explored her Japanese identity and that awesome hole left by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I began to contemplate the Holocaust and what it meant to me, here, now.

At the time, I was beginning my studies in art, and volunteering with the Spielberg-funded *Shoah Foundation*. The foundation was in the process of developing a comprehensive video archive in which the testimonies of Holocaust survivors were told directly to the camera. Some of the witnesses had told their stories many times, to bored classes of squirmy grade fives or at church group meetings. Some of the people who testified had never put their stories into words, not for their own families, nor even for themselves. My job was to write down all the proper names I heard. Some names I recognised: Anya and Shlomo, Schwartz and Fishstein, Aushwitz. And some names were less familiar, Bergen-Belsen, Terezin, Dachau.

Like other stories of survivors captured on film¹, the camera played a crucial role in the telling of their stories. The Shoah archive was used to detail the lives of these witnesses and document what they had seen. The visual aspect of the project helped to

convey information of a different sort– How had pain transformed their faces? Was the suffering evidenced in their eyes? Could you see the numbers tattooed on their arms? The camera satisfied our voyeuristic curiosity about those who have suffered, and our need for physical evidence that this indeed did happen.

This enormous archive will stand not only as an antidote to Leni Reifenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and other Nazi propaganda, but also as an antidote to *Shindler's List* and other stories of what *didn't* happen during World War Two. While the use of the words 'testimony' and 'archive' lend an air of authenticity to the Spielbergian endeavour, one must remember that these are *stories*, told with a perspective in mind, brought to you by the man who made *Jaws*. That is not to say that the project is suspect, simply that the camera is not impartial, or incapable of falsehoods.

For these witnesses, it seemed the camera was asked to play another role: as a vessel that would be capable of containing their grief. It was as if the camera would allow these people to unburden themselves of the horrors they had seen. The camera could handle it, in a way that no human could. The mammoth archive that was amassed would become testament to the power of Spielberg's empire; its meticulousness and attention to detail a strange echo of Hitler's obsession. Since that time, the role of the camera as witness has fascinated me, for the way it stares unflinchingly at the horrors we humans have wrought, for its inability to forget, and for the stories it can tell.

These experiences, the Gulf War, Kyo's work, my work with the *Shoah Foundation*, ignited in me a desire to look at issues of memory and photography. By the time I was introduced to the camera, I knew what kind of art I wanted to make, and what stories I wanted to tell. I have since used my art as a vehicle to try to imagine other people's pain, whether it was my own mother losing her mother when she was only ten, or the six million Jews who were murdered at the hands of the Nazis.



2. Untitled, from the series *children are apt to forget to remember*, 1997.
Gelatin silver print, 26" by 18"
All works by Nancy Friedland unless otherwise noted.

Uncle Harry Returns From War

In my mind's eye I see a photograph. It was taken at Union Station in Toronto long before I was born, at the end of the Second World War. In this photograph, my great Uncle Harry is dressed in full uniform, beaming with pride. His nephew, my Uncle Barry, is twelve years old and the look on his face is euphoric. The two figures are caught up in the elated momentum of the crowd, unaware that they are being photographed. Behind them, small and glowing, is Harry's sister, my grandmother Tillie, who looks straight at

the camera. Weighed down by a heavy overcoat, she smiles knowingly. She is dying of leukaemia and nobody knows it.

My grandmother Tillie died when my mother was ten years old. She died in the spring of 1948, right before Passover. My grandfather, who was a travelling coat salesman, had just received his new winter line. In the weeks before her death, when she knew she was slipping away, she picked out a new coat for her daughter, Judy, who would later become my mom. It was a herringbone pattern and it was itchy, too big for my little mom who was still growing, as ten-year-olds are wont to do.

All that spring, the little house on Glencedar Road was filled with grief, which mingled with an overwhelming sweet smell, as Hyacinths were in season.

Tillie

This loss, my mother's loss, looms large above the horizon of my family landscape. Tillie was beautiful, of course, and beloved, the youngest of seven. Photographs of her have this aura of loss that accompanies them, whatever the seemingly joyful event they are capturing. They are precious objects, no doubt, these shiny, crinkled bits of paper. They are traces of her, of that time, and of sadness. I swear you can tell she died young just looking at those photographs.

But is that sense of loss unique to photographs of Tillie? Or is it something that can be found in all photographs? As John Berger states: "a photograph arrests the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed. All photographs are of the past, yet in them an instant of the past is arrested so that, unlike a lived past, it can never lead to the present. Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning the shock of discontinuity."

We think we have acclimatised to this "shock of discontinuity" since we have lived with photography through many wars, moon landings, births. But as the reach of the camera extends beyond that which we can imagine we realise this shock seems to keep evolving, finding new ways to send us this message about death. The footage from September 11th brought that message home in a whole new way.

So the story of this body of work "Sixes and Sevens" starts long before I was born. It starts with a camera and my beautiful grandmother Tillie. And I suppose it

somehow relates to those parts of seconds, some fifty years ago, in which a shutter opened and closed and the traces of light that passed through were transmogrified into what are now my own memories.

children are apt to forget to remember

I first started investigating my family photographs through a body of work entitled *children are apt to forget to remember* (1997) while I was an undergraduate student at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD). Looking at the way we ‘remember’ events that took place before we were born, I was, without knowing it at the time, exploring the territory that writer Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory”, a way of imagining events you yourself did not experience². The series grew out of those first inklings of a need to create an imaginary narrative for Tillie.

I began with snapshots that held particular meaning for me, such as the one of my Uncle Harry returning from war. Any photographs where Tillie was physically represented or even suggested were haunted by her death. With time, this loss became conflated for me with the *other* great tragedy of the time, the Holocaust. Through the work *children are apt to forget to remember* I try to imagine loss; what it’s like to have your mother die when you are only ten and then, to carry that conceit even further, trying to imagine, in some small way, the horror of genocide.

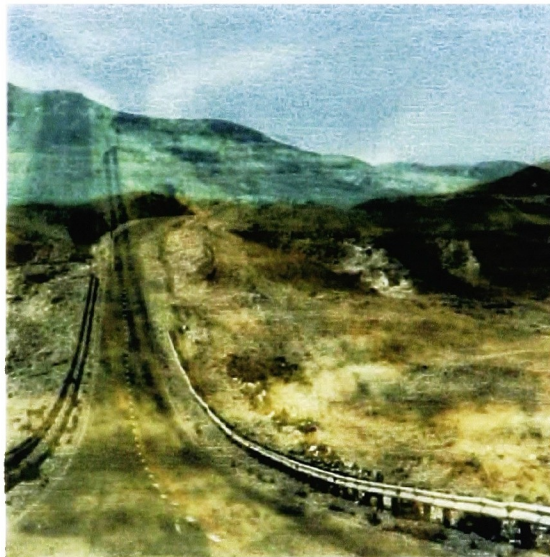
By dismantling the original structure of the photograph, I could, ostensibly, begin again, interpreting the image through my own eyes. I restructured new negatives to focus the viewer's attention on a particular aspect of the remembered -- or misremembered -- moment. How do we miss a family member we never met? How can we feel the absence of someone we never knew? These are the issues I grappled with while developing this work; the ways in which we reconstruct our past, our fabricated family history, our make-believe memories.

Jarring and chaotic in their structure, I wanted the images in this work to impart a kinetic energy more common to cinema than to stills photography. The presentation – in black and white – was also filmic, reminiscent of frames in a movie, evoking narrative. By drawing attention to our active, fluctuating memory, I attempted to give credence to

the emotional content of a photograph rather than its verisimilitude. *children are apt to forget to remember* gave me a chance to visit, or revisit, an imagined past.

A land, alone.

Time wreaks havoc on visual memory, sometimes distorting to make it appear more beautiful, often leaving only vestiges of what once was. In 1998 I furthered my investigation into these notions of memory with a body of work entitled *A land, alone*. Through this work I examined the effect of passing time, how it colours the memory of place.



3. Untitled, from the series *A land, alone*. 1998.
Giclée print on watercolour paper, 21" by 21"

Travel snapshots provide a 4 x 6 inch reminder of a specific location. Some portray a palpable sense of space. But how do we experience remembered space in our mind's eye? What do we see when we close our eyes and think of a particular swimming pool, a road, a land? How do we reconstruct a visual memory of particular location? I wanted to explore the ways in which we fabricate mental images and create visual memories to replace real space.



4. Travel snapshot, 1993. C-print, 4" by 6".

When I began this project I started with one image that resonated strongly within me. The photograph was taken near the end of my stay in Israel. I had lived there for almost two years and I was heading home, uncertain when I would return, already looking for a way to tell the story of my time away from home. From my friend Irad's dilapidated balcony I could see out over the rooftops of Tel Aviv. Before me was a strange landscape of contradictions: modern and in need of repair, private but visible, home and yet not home. With these dichotomies in mind I created the images for the series *A land, alone*, making a connection between travel and fantasy. I was using photography – representations of real landscapes – to tell stories about my experiences in Israel and my emotional landscape. Photography for me had begun to slip away from its moorings in truth.



5. Untitled, from the series *Safe*, 1999. Gelatin Silver print, 27" by 48"

Safe

By the time I entered graduate school at the Rochester Institute of Technology, I had begun to journey down another road. Still engaging the issues of vernacular photography, memory and the concept of imagining other people's pain, I had now become interested in working in a more narrative mode, focussing on the interplay between images. For my first walkthrough (the gruelling one-day critique process), I presented a completed body of work entitled *Safe*, which I had begun in my last year as an undergraduate student at the OCAD. It had become clear by this point that my interests lay in how we invest photographs with meaning and issues of memory. *Safe* was a further investigation into this topic; I was starting to deal specifically with the notion of "postmemory" while still delving into the deep waters of loss.

In lieu of writing a traditional artist statement for *Safe*, I found that writing a poem (see above) helped to highlight the fictive quality of the work on the walls. I had found a connection between the rhythms of my poetry and the erratic installation of my work on the walls. This approach was well received by some who felt the text enhanced the work, while others felt that the eclectic collection of images required more explicit explanation. Most people understood that I was pursuing a fictitious narrative that

somehow suggested or triggered thoughts of the horrors of the Second World War. Inching toward a narrative, six large black and white prints of various sizes were hung at different heights around a cavernous white room. As your eye bounced from one to the next, connections would be made, stories would be revealed, but never fully. There was only one figure in the series, a little girl holding a bouquet of flowers, the image cropped just above her mouth. The images that surrounded this figure seemed to tell her story. The pair of skeletal lawn chairs, the water tower that looks like a watchtower, the cramped house with the windows boarded up – what has happened to this child?

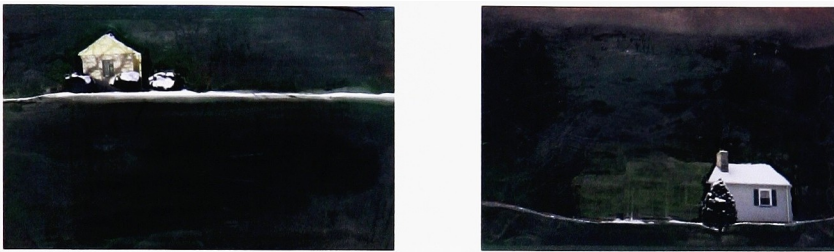
In truth, the little girl is me. And I turned out fine, so far. But I wanted to experiment with this idea of loading a narrative, taking a sunny polaroid of a sweet child and charging it with meaning, a sense of foreboding. At the same time, I was announcing how futile the experiment really was. My attempt to draw attention to this futility was represented by a photograph of a dimly lit bookshelf which was hung upside-down on the wall. The idea here was that the books – which inevitably brought to mind thoughts of book burning – were about to fall. See? Impending doom! This self-conscious gesture was not universally well received. Some people found it obvious and obnoxious. Others, however, understood exactly what I was attempting to communicate and appreciated my post-modern sensibility; that is, to critique the work within the work itself.

Home

In the second quarter I embarked on what seemed an entirely new mode of investigation. Feeling very isolated and disconnected, my husband and I were a newly-married commuter-couple who only saw each other on the weekends. All that shuttling back and forth lead me to take pictures out my car window of houses. I used these snapshots as a vehicle to communicate some of the feelings of longing for home, or longing for that mythic idea of home, that I was experiencing.

I took these 4x 6 inch drugstore prints and painted out most of the information surrounding the house using India ink. The houses would be left floating in a sea of black. Sometimes a tree in the background would show through, sometimes the image would turn completely black, leaving only a faint horizon line. Alone on the white walls, the flimsy bits of paper huddled in little constellations.

I enjoyed making this work, I was seduced by the craftiness of it, and I loved getting my hands dirty. What initially motivated this work, however was a need to play it safe. It was a simple idea that was relatively easy to execute, but I think it was also a way for me to deal with the fact that I needed to produce something in the ten-week period in between walkthroughs. The kind of work I had chosen to do allowed me to work quickly and efficiently, my ideas were easy to express and the notions I was dealing with were simple enough that I was able to defend myself during the walkthrough.



7. Untitled, from the series *Home*, 2000. C-print with India ink. Each 6" by 4".

In retrospect, however, I see these images more as visual experiments that would ultimately find their way into my thesis work. Interference with the surface of the image is a technique that I would continue to develop through my second year. I found myself gravitating toward a surface that revealed the traces that the hand makes. The pristine surface of the photograph, where the image sits on top of the paper, had become unsatisfying to me, for its lack of depth. As well I was exploring the house shape, and all that accompanies this loaded symbol, which is something that stayed with me in my thesis work. Finally, through this work I was realising the power of the horizon line: How the presence of that one line, even the suggestion of it, can change the meaning of an image, deepen it, and give it depth.

With this work, I had taken a break from mining the depths of postmemory, but by the third quarter I was ready to get back to the notions I had come to graduate school to focus on.



8. Untitled study for the series *Sixes and Sevens*, 2001.
Digital print with safflower oil and wax 4" by 4".

A return to “my own little horrors”³

My third quarter efforts became a study for my thesis work. Printed in antique-y shades of green and purple these fabricated images were embalmed in wax and thus protected. For the final presentation, the flimsy digital prints were hung out from the walls and lit so they glowed. Again, as with *Safe*, I was constructing a phoney past, a contrived family history. For this work I used my own family photographs and more or less seamlessly collaged them with landscapes I had shot to create these images that were still reminiscent of a family album, but a family album gone wrong.

After doing the series of little painted houses, I realised how much I had enjoyed leaving my mark on the surface of the images. Creating the imagery for this series using my computer, and I then printed them out on my crappy colour printer which gave them a very dotted effect that simulated film grain. In each picture I embedded a very dark border that referenced a historical photographic process such as Van Dyke or cyanotype. Even though these images were many steps removed from a photographic print that was made in the darkroom they still nonetheless were identified as photographs and therefore referenced the real.

Dissatisfied with how the image was sitting on the surface of the paper – there appeared to be no mystery to what I was doing – I started experimenting with different ways of mediating the image, adding something that would stand between the image and the viewer. I eventually stumbled upon a process in which I would oil the paper, (originally using olive oil from my kitchen, I eventually graduated to artist grade safflower oil) and then painting on melted wax.



9. Untitled study for the series *Sixes and Sevens*, 2001.
Digital print with safflower oil and wax 2" by 4".

The effect was exactly what I had been looking for. There was still a distinctly photographic look to the images owing to their snapshot-size, but they had gained an object quality that somehow allowed the viewer to think of them as something other than photographs. These images now spoke more directly to the notions of memory I was exploring; the transience, the layeredness, the ephemeral quality. As with the houses, I chose to install the thirty-five small images in somewhat random configuration all on one large white wall that was brightly lit so that the images seemed to emanate light. Like *Safe*, the installation was set up in a montage-like sequence, each image was read in light of the ones that surrounded it. Unlike *Safe*, however, these images were tiny, snapshot size or smaller, as if they had escaped from the family album, and were caught floating in this nether world between object and memory.

The poem that follows was written to accompany the images.

Sixes and sevens

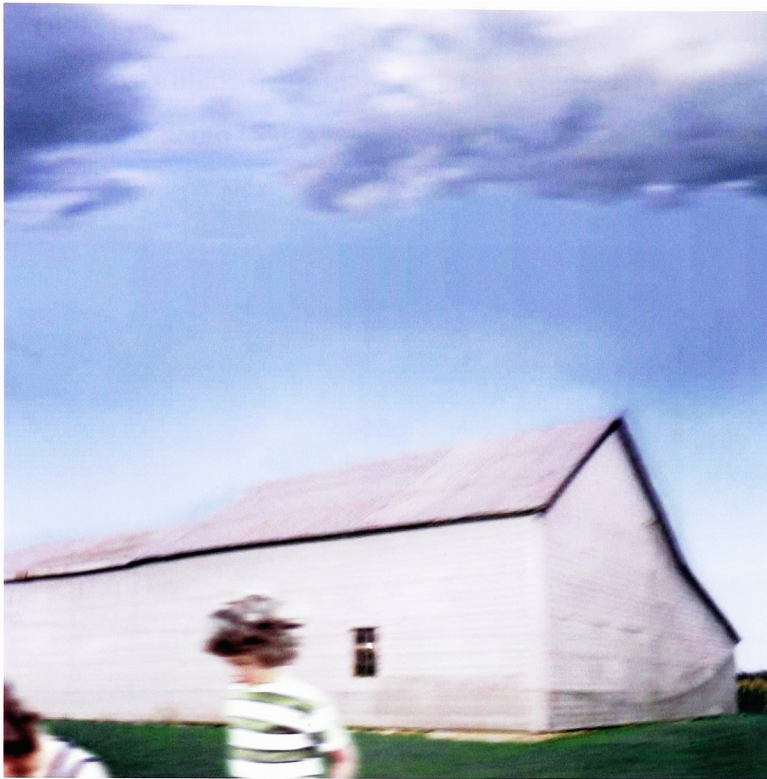
*While I was having silent
underwater tea parties,
lives were lost
taken
children and men
both good and bad.
Mothers too, disappear.*

*I could have been six or seven,
or not at all
on a horse
or a train,
I could swim for days
and not get cold.*

*You know that photograph –
the one by the lake
there's a shadow in the water
or it could be a bird flying over head
it's out of focus, anyway*

*that's where I drowned
or could have
while you weren't watching.*

And so, by the third quarter I had returned to the notions of postmemory with a renewed vigour. This time I focussed on the imaginary aspects of memory, freeing myself from the tyranny of truth so often associated with photography.



10. Untitled, from the series *Sixes and Sevens*, 2001.
Gicl  print with safflower oil and wax 24" by 24".

A layer of meaning

When I began my thesis work in the fall of 2000, I knew that I wanted my work to have a more immediate resonance, to speak to my own lived history. Moving away from the historical-processes-look of the earlier studies, I shifted to using full colour, and discarded the blackened edges. This gave a very different effect, placing the images in the much less distant past. The colours were now more in keeping with a 1970's photographic aesthetic, or to be more precise, the colours were washed out to such a degree that they looked like a thirty-year-old colour photograph that had faded with time.

I knew that I wanted to keep the translucency of the small studies but I wasn't sure how to present them. I experimented long and hard with different modes of presentation, at one point entirely giving up the wax surface and opting instead for a glossy photographic effect. But eventually, with the support of my thesis advisors, I returned to the wax, conceding that while it was proving difficult to work with, there was a layer of meaning that disappeared when the images were presented as straight photographic prints. They somehow had become one-dimensional family photographs

and it was not apparent that my hand had been intimately involved in shaping these memories. The wax made the prints a cohesive whole, lent that air of mystery I was looking for, gave a depth to this new history I had constructed.

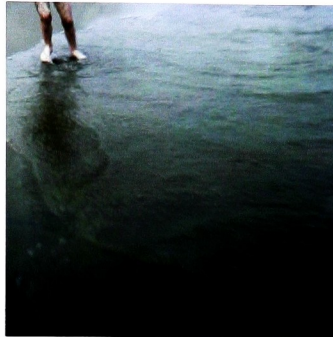


11. Untitled, from the series *Sixes and Sevens*, 2001.
Giclée print with safflower oil and wax 24" by 24".

Ten images grew to 21 by 21 inches, accompanied by a smaller series of eight 10 by 10 inch prints. While I was now working with a more uniform scale and shape, I was still concerned with sequencing the images as the narrative would change considerably according to the flow from one to the next. Instead of maintaining the fragility by delicately pinning them to the wall as they were in the earlier studies, they were given solidity by placing them within the confines of a frame. The images had no matting and no glass so they appeared more as paintings than photography. While something was lost in this transition, something else was gained: by working larger, I was able to be more deliberate with the wax, making each brush stroke count. The translucency of the earlier studies had morphed into an object with more weight and authenticity.

I used the same title that I had for the third quarter work as no new title had come along to take its place. For me the title, *Sixes and Sevens*, operates on two levels. It refers

to the ages six and seven and to the notion of being at “sixes and sevens”, that is, being neither here nor there, being in between.



12. Untitled, from the series *Sixes and Sevens*, 2001.
Giclé print with safflower oil and wax.
24" by 24" each.

Although the imagery that I used in this series grew out of the work I had done for the studies, I now pushed these notions even further. I took characters from family photographs and fused them with my own landscapes, sometimes creating an image where parts of sky or land had no real existing counterpart, but were merely pixels: or more simply, the image was created using the zeroes and ones of my computer's binary code. I placed my characters in places they had never been. As with that little girl in the series *Safe*, I often situated the figures in dangerous situations, full of foreboding.

Sixes and Sevens imagines events that occurred in a place that does not exist, in a time before I was born. Or perhaps they have yet to happen. Through these images I am constructing a past of emphatically misremembered moments. Borrowing bits and pieces of photographs, stretching the truth, these make-believe memories constitute an ersatz family album: what might have happened, what might still happen, in a past not my own.



13. Eldon Garnet, *NO*, 1997

There are many artists who have contributed to my understanding of photography and memory, fiction and narrative. Through my six years of studying photography, I have been introduced to a number of artists who share my fascination with loss, witness, and the horrors of the Second World War. Sometimes these artists would embrace this fascination, sometimes they would work against it.

Eldon Garnet, a Toronto artist who taught me at OCAD, showed me a way to develop a narrative language using photographs as a poet would words. He often works in sequences, each image being informed by the one that came before and the one that comes after. By working through iconic imagery, Garnet builds a slippery language that is at once about the past, the present, and the future, about reality and mythology. His photographic work spans religion and paganism, a fall from grace and redemption, life and death. The series *NO* illustrates this polemical debate within Garnet's work with brutal clarity. As Gary Michael Dault states in *Canadian Art*: "Here, written a little larger and more insistently than usual, is the raw stuff of metaphor, the start-up of the engines of narrative, a beckoning towards allegory -- both presented and withheld at the same time."⁴

Garnet is reluctant to posit his own work as being about the Holocaust but I believe its influence is evidenced in his work. A series entitled *When?* from 1993 depicts a larger than life-sized pile of ashes, a pile of teeth and a pile of butterfly wings. These photographs are shown together with the remnants of a charred tree, in the shape of a tree. Each element in this installation suggests the absence of the thing, or person that was, but is now, gone. The tree, or the not-tree, burns with elegiac metaphor. It is a

memorial to the tree that was; the fact that it retains its treeness makes forgetting impossible. The tree cannot forget what it was.



14. Family snapshot, Christian Boltanski and his brother.

The act of Telling

Building a tree out of charred limbs so as not to forget is a notion that is a part of the Jewish tradition. Every year, around springtime, Jews all over the world gather around the Passover Seder table to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. In Israel they tell the story once, but in the Diaspora we tell it on two nights, I suppose because we are more forgetful. The Haggadah, the book that we use to tell the story, explains “the more one tells of the exodus from Mitzrayim, the more are they to be praised.” Year after year, we tell the same story, as if we, ourselves, had been slaves to the Pharaoh in Egypt, as if we, ourselves, had been freed by the hand of God.

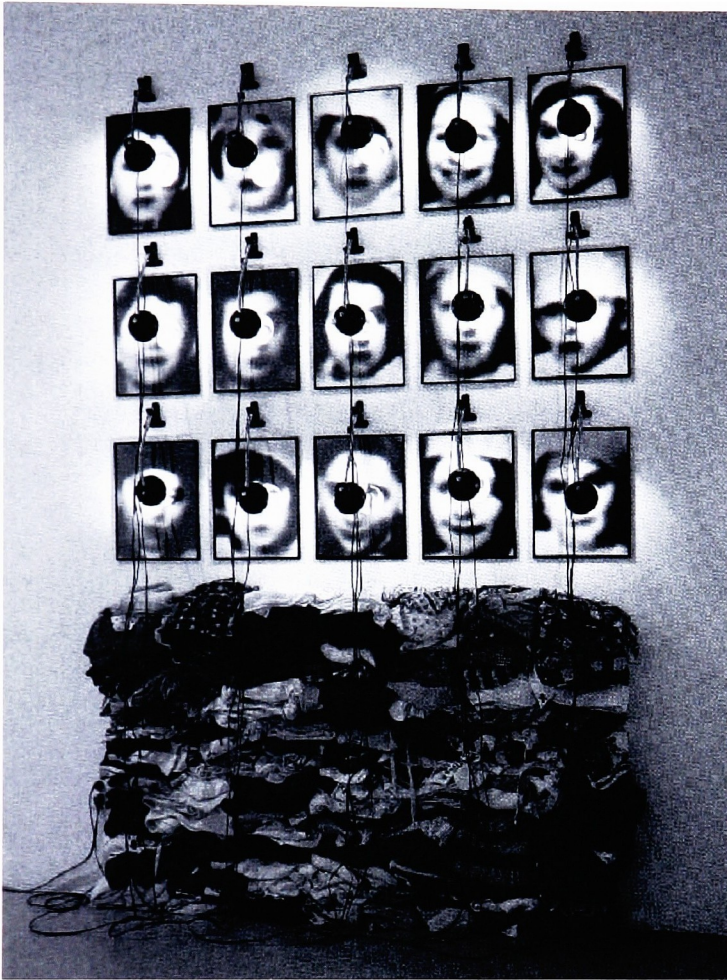
The facts of the story don’t seem to matter; it is the act of telling that is important. I often wonder if Jewish families will one day gather around and tell the story of the Holocaust. How would that story be told? Would there be songs that would be sung? A festive meal? In Israel they mark the day and call it Remembrance Day, but in the Diaspora we mark the day only peripherally, not in the way we mark the Jewish New

Year or even Hanukah – a remarkably unholy holiday – which is nonetheless ardently celebrated outside Israel.

My own parents were snug in their beds when their uncles and cousins were rounded up and brought to concentration camps. I was, of course, not born. And yet I feel the need to tell the story as if I were there. As if I could imagine what that was like. Still, we use our imaginations to tell these stories; I use art as a way of telling, perhaps because we Jews are so afraid of forgetting. Ours is a sometimes vengeful God, and forgetting is a sin.

Not with a shovel, but with a hand

Christian Boltanski was there, and yet not there. (Like the charred tree.) His parents converted from Judaism to Catholicism and named their son Christian. Jewish and not-Jewish. And so he was spared, and yet not spared because his work is more than haunted by loss and remembrance. He states: “My work is about the fact of dying, but it’s not about the Holocaust itself...” “I don’t think it’s about Jewish history. I often get this kind of misunderstanding with my work. Of course it’s post-Holocaust art, but that is not the same as saying it is Jewish art. I hope my work is general.”⁵ Like Eldon Garnet, he is uncomfortable with the association with the Holocaust. However, our visual vocabulary does not allow for another interpretation. We see piles of clothes, piles of teeth -- the Holocaust is what we know.



15. Christian Boltanski
Reserves: The Purim Holiday, 1989

It is hard to imagine, what happens in a war. It is hard to imagine. Our wars are well televised, we have many images we can hold in our minds. And yet, it is hard to imagine. George Rodger's image of a child walking through the Bergen-Belsen Concentration camp already has a place in our imagination. We see a sunny day and a child strolling through what looks like a park, save for the piles of bodies. But we now know what this is about. How did this image appear to people when it was first published? Did they have as much difficulty wrestling meaning from war imagery as we do now? Fifty-five years have passed since the end of World War Two. We now have a store of symbols and a language that has come to mean the horror of the Holocaust. Movies and books help us to see, help us to imagine what happened there. For those of

us who have not experienced the horrors of war, we need fiction to liberate meaning from images such as this one.



16. George Rodger, Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp, April 1945

“Narrative language can provide names for even the most extreme excesses of violence. Metaphor can function as a powerful container for meaning and loss.” states Kyo Maclear in her book *Beclouded Visions: Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness*. Being able to give a name to violence provides a certain cathartic release from it.

Sophie Ristelhueber works with images of war and remembrance. Born in 1949 in post-war France, Ristelhueber is an artist who has travelled to some of the globe’s most wounded sites in order to produce her work. Vehemently opposed to being lumped with photojournalists, she is not interested in straight reportage, as if such a thing truly exists. Ristelhueber asserts, and I’m inclined to agree with her, that our ability to respond to violence through journalistic images is limited. Stories of war must be told in a more creative way, the truth must be unearthed not with a shovel but with a hand.

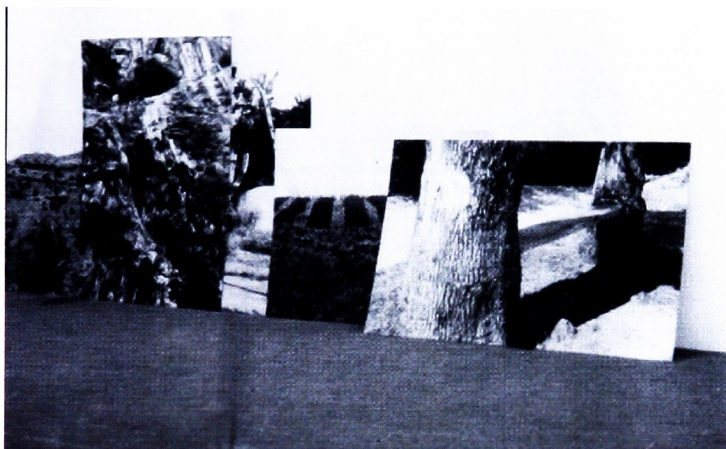


17. Sophie Ristelhueber, detail from *Fait*, 1992.

In Ristelhueber's *Fait* (1992) she works in a grid to create two joining walls of photographs. Moving from sand brown to black and white and back again, the images were taken by Ristelhueber on a trip to the Kuwaiti desert after the Gulf War. The bodies are gone but the debris is still there. The title in French has a double meaning; 'done' and 'fact' are both spelled f-a-i-t in French. Ristelhueber uses this double entendre titling technique often, a fact not irrelevant to her overriding thesis: finding a word or an image that can be read in two ways. Within the grid, the scale changes from block to block, sometimes we are safely soaring above a sandy landscape sometimes we are faced with the intimate detritus of lost lives; a television, a boot, a blanket. Without labels telling us where we are and what we are looking at, the effect is dizzying. There is nothing to ground us.

One of the notions being considered in Ristelhueber's work comes from Duchamp. A photograph of lines made in sand was then titled as an aerial shot, presumably taken from the vantage point of an airplane. Ristelhueber was greatly influenced by this concept while working on *Fait*. Duchamp's work was simulated for the sake of transcending the fact of what it was and becoming something else, whereas Ristelhueber is photographing the real with the hope of undermining its truthfulness and turning it into something more meaningful: fiction.

This intention becomes more apparent as we continue through Ristelhueber's body of work to the landscapes of flesh depicted in *Every One*. In this series she chooses the body as the site to further her investigations concerning truth and fiction. One assumes from the context of the work that these are victims of violence, ethnic cleansing, torture. Their skin has been repaired with stitches and keloid scars, in much the same way as the earth is repairing itself in *Fait*. Ristelhueber sought out these individuals through Paris hospitals in order to obtain specific images of particularly spectacular scars. At this point in the exhibit one realises that Ristelhueber is not sending us on a wild goose chase towards an understanding of human nature in all its barbarity. Her goals are particular and her methods would be considered unethical if she were a photojournalist. But these are merely fictions, her fictions.



18. Sophie Ristelhueber detail from *La Campagne*, 1992.

La Campagne (referring to both the countryside and a political campaign) is the most difficult collection of Ristelhueber images I have encountered. Completed in 1997, these large photographs taken in Bosnia seem to say 'move along, now — there's nothing to see here.' Stacked against the wall and obscuring one another are pictures of innocuous greenery which seem as if they are yet to be installed or possibly not meant for installation. These seemingly banal images remind me of the outtakes of someone's travel snapshots -- the ones that didn't quite come out, the ones that didn't make the final cut. But these images are anything but banal. As the writing on the wall tells us, in one shot, we are looking at the view that concentration camp victims would have seen beyond

the barbed wire. A mass grave is shown, all prettily overgrown, as nature attempts to hide the scars we humans make.



19. Untitled, from the series *Sixes and Sevens*, 2001.
Gicl  print with safflower oil and wax,
24" by 24" each.

Camera Lucida

In all the literature that links issues of memory and photography, *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes is the seminal text on which all other writings are based. In this short book, Barthes is ostensibly reflecting on the nature of photography, but the recent death of the writer's mother haunts each page, each word coated with the thickness of mourning. Written shortly before his own passing in 1980, the French sociologist/semiologist, initially a structuralist who later evolved into a post-structuralist, addresses the "burden" of representation in photography, using himself as the focus of its effects.

To facilitate this inquiry, in the first part of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes develops a new lexicon of terms that remain relevant to the discourse on photography twenty years later. Here, through the lens of his own understanding of loss, he lays the phenomenological groundwork on which the more intimate discussion of photography will later be built.

Examining the Wound

Barthes' 'phenomenology' builds on the classical understanding of the term, as understood by Husserl and his followers at the beginning of the twentieth century. This phenomenology, Barthes purports, still engages in ideas of perception and knowledge, but it now must also make room for notions such as desire and mourning.⁶ Barthes continually acknowledges that it is his own perspective as spectator that is paramount to his interpretation. Positioning himself within the dynamics of looking, he states: "as *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for "sentimental" reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think."⁷

Barthes locates his analysis within the parameters of that which is personal, intimate, and familiar. Thus, this wound he explores is not contained by photographic representation: it is also the deep mark left by the passing of his mother. Barthes searches for a photograph of her that might reveal her "unique being". He delineates the difference between a photograph in which he recognises his mother and one in which her essence is revealed: "These same photographs, which phenomenology would call 'ordinary objects', were merely analogical, provoking only her identity, not her truth; but the Winter Garden Photograph, was indeed essential, it achieved for me utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*."⁸ While it is clear that he recognises the impossibility of what he is suggesting, Barthes names this desire to unearth truth in photography, to seek the essence of being through representation.



20. Untitled, from the series *Sixes and Sevens*, 2001.
Gicl  print with safflower oil and wax.
24" by 24" each.

History

While Barthes “recognises” his mother in many of her photographs, her style of dress is foreign to him – he did not know her as a young woman – he nonetheless, is “pricked” by the *punctum* of a photograph; that which breaks the surface of the image. The brightness of her eyes punctures him in a way that the *studium* of the photograph, the details which interest him in a passing way, cannot. Barthes explains: “With regard to many of these photographs, it was History which separated me from them. Is History not simply that time when I was not born? I could read my non-existence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her. There is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed *differently*.”⁹

The first part of *Camera Lucida* is largely taken up with the development of this language, the naming of things, poetically parsing each element of photography from inside out. Then Barthes shifts the discussion from the outside, inward. He examines his own relationship to a very particular photograph.

The Winter Garden Photograph

This photograph, the “Winter Garden Photograph” as it is called, is the only photograph that truly exists for Barthes. The image is of his mother as a young girl

posing in an indoor garden with her brother. In this photograph, Barthes saw the frailty of a child, uncertain in front of the camera. Here, he sees her essence, her kindness, something he was not able to summon from all other photographs of her. In order to involve us in this romantic tale of loss and remembrance, Barthes explains how he nursed his mother through her dying days and how in her weakness she became the child and he the mother: “During her illness I nursed her, held the bowl of tea she liked because it was easier to drink from than a cup; she had become my little girl, uniting for me with that essential child she was in her first photograph.”¹⁰

Familial looks

Marianne Hirsch, in her book *Family frames: photography, narrative and postmemory*, returns again and again to the ideas set forth by Barthes, particularly his meditation on the Winter Garden Photograph. Hirsch uses his text as a departure point from which she establishes connections between the family photograph and our construction of the notion of family:

*Multiple looks circulate in the photograph's production, reading, and description: Roland's mother, facing her parents as she is being photographed, at the same "time" faces her son who finds himself in her picture. The picture of a little girl and her brother is traversed and constituted by a series of "familial looks" that both create and consolidate the familial relations among the individuals involved, fostering an unmistakable sense of mutual recognition.*¹¹

Like *Camera Lucida*, Hirsch's book, is held in place by the “burden” of photographic reference, “a power that shapes family pictures”¹². By reading family photographs in this way, their relationship to the lived experience is highlighted and called into question.

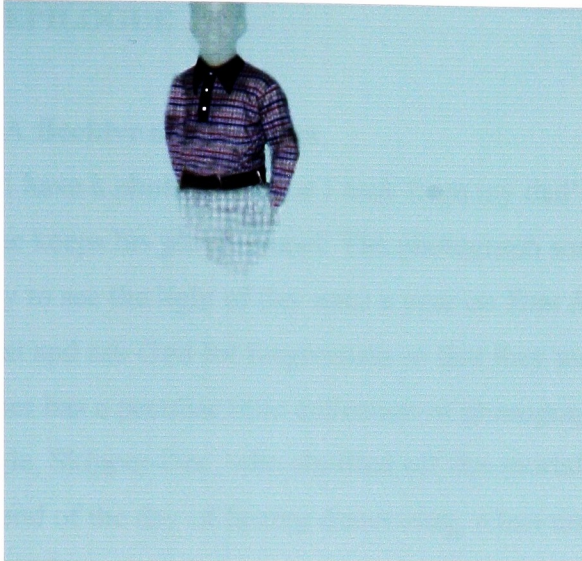
Hirsch also posits another relationship that exists in the collection of familial looks: postmemory. Postmemory is set apart from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. “Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.”¹³ I like this idea. I believe in this notion for the ways in which it allows me to enter into my family

history. There is no question here of truth, it is clear that my understanding of the past is as false as fiction. But, in that sense, it is also as true as fiction. My grandmother Tillie is a mythic figure in our family. Photographs of her serve to strengthen her mythic stature.

Clocks for seeing

In Barthes' lexicon, the referent, or the person or thing being photographed, that was there, is named "the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to the "spectacle" and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead."¹⁴ Through language, Barthes reiterates his point, connecting Theatre, that is, the cult of the Dead, and photography. Photography is inextricably linked to Time, Barthes claims, the click announcing the end of the pose; cameras were clocks for seeing.¹⁵

In every photograph of my legendary grandmother Tillie (who of course, never was a grandmother), I swear you can tell that she died young. Of course I know the context; I know the end of the story. And maybe that knowledge is not unique to photographs of those who died young; we are just more apt to find it there. Perhaps, Barthes would contend, Death is a feature of all photographs, and it can be attributed to a confusion between that which is real and that which is alive. "By shifting this Reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead."¹⁶ By constantly insisting that it refers to something real, photography also insists that it refers to something alive. If it was alive at the instant when the photograph was taken it must be dead now. Or at least, it no longer exists in the way that we saw it in the instant of the flash.



21. Untitled, 2001.
Giclée print with safflower oil and wax.
6" by 6". (See endnotes for details.)

Where does my work fit in to this discussion? I am attached to many of these notions and find myself grasping for each of them at different times. I slip and slide between Barthes' notion of a photographic essence and Hirsch's idea of postmemory, but for different reasons. I deeply connect with Barthes' understanding of the Winter Garden Photograph because I think it helps to explain the power that my own family photographs have over me. But I need Hirsch's notion of postmemory to explain the direction of my work. I want my images to ring with the sharpness of recognition that Barthes felt when looking into the eyes of his mother as a child. But I want the freedom to use my imagination to tell new stories, stories of things that never happened.

It is a comfortable place to be right now, this imaginary landscape where family members play characters that I can control. I can let them languish on the edge of a cliff or usher them away from danger, according to my whim. Forever mediated by the cropping, the wax, the blur that reveals just enough to know that something has happened, but never what, or to whom, I can keep my distance from the stories I am telling. And this distance lets me feel safe.

EPILOGUE

A Beehive of memories

I have a photograph that I took from my dad's *tullis sekel*, the little velvet bag where he keeps his prayer shawl. The photograph somehow found its way into the bag and only to see the light of day once a year on *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement, when Jews fast and ask God for forgiveness so that they may be written into the book of life. My father has a peculiar little collection of photographs, many featuring the spectacularly fat beagle, Skipper-Dee, who shuffled off this mortal coil some eight or nine years ago. As the end of the day of fasting draws near, when time creeps, the pictures come out and we are giddy.

The *tullis sekel* also contains a few fusty pressed flowers. Passion flowers, I think they're called, a preposterous looking bloom that we encountered when I was eight years old and we lived in Israel. That year, twenty-two years ago now, we spent Yom Kippur at an orthodox synagogue in Zefat, a beautiful artist's colony in the North, where it is hot and dry. My sister, my mom and I sat upstairs with the women where the heat was so overwhelming, someone fainted.

In this funny little photograph that I stole, my father is wearing a bug hat that hides his face and a bright orange rain poncho, but I know it's him. The bottoms of his pants are wet from the grass. It must have been taken in the spring because that's when the bugs in North Ontario are so bad, if you open your mouth you will taste them. In the photograph, it is night and the person who took the picture must have used a flash which makes the orange poncho glow. My father has a can of something in his hand and he is spraying what appears to be a beehive that has made its home just above the kitchen window.

ENDNOTES

¹ In figure 1 we see a very familiar image from the Vietnam War, but it is not only during wartime that the camera is asked to play the role of witness: Rodney King, the television show *Survivors*, and more recently – and more gravely – the workers from the World Trade Center fleeing the collapsing building. How does the fact that cameras were there to witness these events change the way they are perceived, remembered and historicized?

² While in retrospect it is quite clear that the ideas I am working with relate to the notion of postmemory, I did not know to call it that at the time. In fact, I was not introduced to Hirsch's book until graduate school, where it was a core text from a course called Family Album, taught by Angela Kelly at RIT. I credit Kelly and the other students in this class for helping me to develop the ideas set forth in this paper and in my thesis exhibition itself.

³ See poem on page 2.

⁴ Gary Michael Dault, "Loss Leaders", *Canadian Art*, volume 16, Number 1, March 1999, p. 80-82.

⁵ Tamar Garb. Semin, Didier. Kuspit, Donald. Perec, Georges. Boltanski, Christian. 1997. *Christian Boltanski*. London: Phaidon Press, p. 68.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 21

⁷ Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 21.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 71.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 64.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 72.

¹¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family frames: photography, narrative, and postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 1.

¹² Marianne Hirsch, *ibid*, p. 6.

¹³ Marianne Hirsch, *ibid*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *ibid*, p. 79.

¹⁷ This body of work was completed while I was working on *Sixes and Sevens*. I used old class photos, isolating a single gesture, or a piece of clothing to create these odd images. Although the work relates to my thesis, the connection is tangential, and therefore, I have chosen to save that discussion for my next paper!



1. Nancy Friedland, 2001.
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



2. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



3. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



4. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



5. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



6. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



7. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



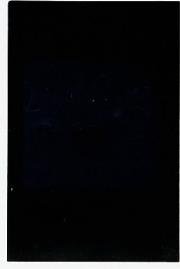
8. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



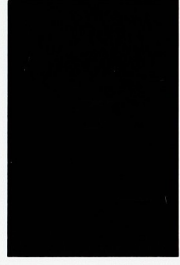
9. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



10. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



11. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



12. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



13. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



14. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*



15. Nancy Friedland, 2001
from the series *Sixes and Sevens*